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ABSTRACT

Genericization theory developed as a response to claims from outside of linguistics that generic use in brand names (for example, using Kleenex as a generic noun for all facial tissues, or Xerox for all photocopiers) is the result of marketing factors or misuse by consumers. This paper examines the linguistic factors that create an environment where genericization of a brand name could take place. These triggers of generic brand name change can provide insight into more traditional problems of semantic change, namely the problems of actuation, or how such changes begin, and whether there are types of semantic change that may be seen as regular or systematic. There are four primary hypotheses that form genericization: (1) Novelty--when a brand name for an innovative product and the association of that item with its brand name become synonymous; (2) length and predominance--when the predominate brand name in a semantic class is shorter than the corresponding class-noun, and the brand becomes the generic for the entire semantic class; (3) genericization as a regular process--when the brand name change is a regular process that recurs in the same pattern; and (4) simple association--when there is a psychological association between a brand name and a single product (i.e. Rollerblades or Walkman). (KFT)

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Genericization: A Theory of Semantic Broadening in the Marketplace

Shawn M. Clankie

Introduction

Genericization theory developed as a response to claims from outside of linguistics that generic use in brand names (e.g. using ***kleenex*** as a generic noun for all tissues) was as a result of purely marketing factors and /or 'misuse' by consumers (INTA 1993, Finn 1993, Terez 1994)[1]. Within linguistics itself little work has been done on brand names despite the proliferating effect brand names play in daily life. The intent of my initial research was to seek out the linguistic factors that created an environment where genericization of the brand name could take place (Clankie 1999, Clankie 1999b). These triggers of generic brand-name change could then, it was hoped, provide insight into more traditional problems of semantic change, namely the problems of (1) actuation, or how such changes begin, and (2) whether there are certain types of semantic change which may be seen as regular or systematic. A basic definition of genericization is the semantic broadening in brand names from specific in reference to a generic form representative of the entire semantic class to which that product belongs. This paper provides a brief overview of genericization and the findings of Clankie 1999b. However, before proceeding to the theory itself it will be important to consider for a moment the differences between brand names and other types of name in order to fully understand the

[1] In Clankie 1999, *genericization* was refered to by another name, *genericy*, which itself was created in response to the proprietary industry name *genericide*. Genericy, and later genericization, are preferred as a means of extrapolating away the negative bias attached to the term genericide (cf. genocide). While genericy was found to be easy to pronounce, morphologically it was deemed ambiguous. The suggestion to move to the longer, but more morphologically sound form genericization was prompted by Professor Byron Bender, and is acknowledged.

process that makes up genericization.

Traditional Name Forms and Brand Names

The brand name differs in four key areas from other types of name (anthroponyms, toponyms, etc.). First, unlike other types of name, every brand name in English carries a visible actuation date. The process by which a brand is registered leaves an accessible trail that allows us to see when the brand first came onto the market and hence, into the language. This provides a constraint not found in most names and permits easy tracking of the name and of the types of change that a brand name may undergo.

The registration process noted in the previous paragraph alludes to the second difference between the brand name and other names; proprietary status. Proprietary status of the brand name simply means that a degree of ownership of the name is granted under the law to protect the holder of the name from infringement by makers of a similar product, or by others who simply wish to piggyback on the success of a good name (e.g. cybersquatters).

A third difference is that while in personal names a limited degree of deviation in orthography is permitted (cf. Shawn, Shaun, Sean), in brand name creation there is little concern for the orthographic, stylistic, and other rules of the language. Purposeful misspellings, violation of morpheme boundaries, and overuse of majuscules are commonplace.

Finally, whereas the grammatical status of most names are that of a proper noun, in the case of the brand name, these names are proper adjectives. This comes as a result of the proprietary status afforded the brand name. All brand names, as they are registered, are given a common class noun phrase. This common class noun phrase is the actual name for the product (as recognized by the law). This then relegates the brand name to be representative of the maker of the product and not the name for the product itself, thereby giving it the role of a proper adjective modifying the common class noun phrase. *Kleenex tissues* is the official name for the brand of tissues produced by the Kimberly-Clark company. In this case, *tissues* is the common class noun phrase and *Kleenex* is a proper adjective, referring to the maker of the product, Kimberly-Clark.

Hypotheses

There are four primary hypotheses that form genericization (Clankie 1999b). Each is presented below with a brief explanation.

H1. (Novelty). If A is a brand name for an innovative product (one which did not exist before), then the association of that item with its name will become synonymous, rendering the brand name both a product name, and the name for the entire semantic class.

Hypothesis one is concerned with innovation in the marketplace and in the language. The hypothesis argues that when a completely novel product enters the marketplace, a product for which no name existed prior (e.g. rollerblades, post-it notes) then it is natural for the name of the maker of that product to fill in the gap that exists between a new product and the missing name for that product in the language. This can be seen in Formula 1.

product name	class name	product name		class name
A	0	A	⟶	A

Formula 1. Innovation and Genericization

Illustration 1 (below) demonstrates this hypothesis with the brand name *Rollerblades*.

product name	class noun	product name		class name
Rollerblades	0	Rollerblades	⟶	rollerblades

Illustration 1. Innovation and Genericization

H2. (Length and Predominance). If the predominate brand name in a semantic class (e.g. types of over-the-counter pain killers) is shorter than the corresponding class-noun, that predominate brand name will become the generic for the entire semantic class.

The second hypothesis considers length and predominance. It assumes that one of the triggers of generic brand-name change is that the brand name is shorter than its corresponding class noun phrase. For example, compare the generic brand name *velcro* to its corresponding class noun phrase 'hook and loop fasteners'. It is not difficult to see why people choose to refer the product as simply *velcro*.

A further assumption not explicitly specified in H2, yet one that is nonetheless important, is that the ease of articulation of the brand name in relation to its class noun phrase is an additional trigger in this hypothesis that aids genericization in taking place[2]. The formula for hypothesis two, along with its illustration, appear below.

product name	class name	product name	class name
a l	b b	a l ⟶	a l

Formula 2. Simplicity and Genericization

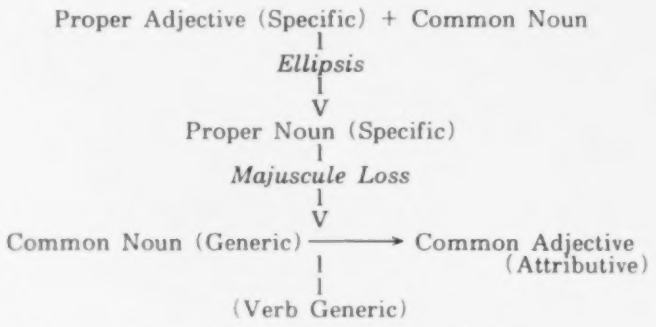
product name	class name	product name	class name
Jell-O	gelatin	Jell-O ⟶	jello

Illustration 2. Simplicity and Genericization

H3. (Genericization as a Regular Process). Ellipsis of the common noun is a prerequisite for generic brand-name change. The process is ellipsis of the common noun, which in turn results in a grammatic shift from proper adjective to proper noun. The next step is from proper noun to common noun. The common noun then may (in some cases) become a verb or can be used as an attributive adjective.

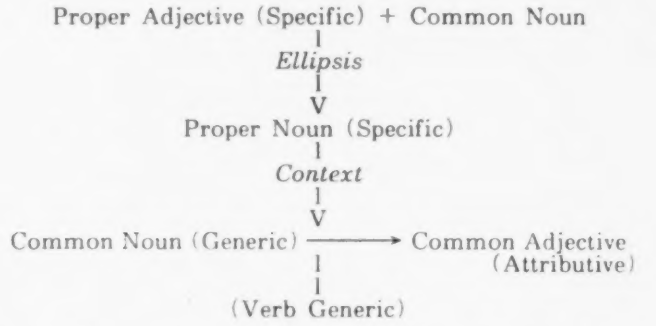
[2] Clankie 1999 first noted the possible interaction between the ease of articulation of many generic brand names. Yet, ease of articulation was excluded from 1999 b due to problems of measurement. In particular, how does one quantitatively measure the ease of articulation? It resurfaces here as a further plausible extension of Hypothesis 2, and remains under consideration.

A traditional problem in studying semantic change is whether it is possible to identify regular patterns in semantic change. McMahon (1994: 175) writes, "Are there regular semantic changes, with recurring types; or must we accept that 'every word has its own history'". After examining brand names over a period of time it became apparent that there was nothing haphazard about the semantic (and grammatical) movement from specific to generic in brand names. This led to the formulation of hypothesis three, where genericization involves a regular pattern of change. The outline of Hypothesis 3 is shown in the formula below.



Formula 3. The Process of Genericization (in Writing)

While the intent of Clankie 1999b was to discover the triggers and patterning of generic change in a written corpus, preliminary consideration was given to the same process in speaking, and how genericization in speaking might differ from that in writing. While the patterns are strikingly similar, Formula 4 shows one major difference.



Formula 4. The Process of Genericization (in Speaking)

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In Formula 4, the primary difference between genericization in writing and that in speaking centers around the semantic change from specific to generic. In writing, demajusculization is one certain key that a brand name is being used in a generic sense. Yet, in speech majuscules are not pronounced, so how does one ascertain the use of a brand name in speech as specific or generic? The answer to this is, quite simply, the context of the sentence.

> **H4. (The Single Association Hypothesis). There must be a psychological association between a brand name and a single product. It appears that brand names which represent items from a number of different classes are much more difficult to attach a generic meaning to. For example, the brand name *Rollerblades* can be attached to any brand of in-line skates, and is only associated with that purpose. Compare that to Chanel, which makes a variety of different products (perfume, clothing, etc.). In other words, a generic meaning can not be assigned because there is no single item association to be made.**

Hypothesis 4 argues that a brand name must have a single association for the name to become generic. Genericization does not appear to occur in those brand names which represent products across a variety of semantic classes, because no single product association is to be made. If we refer back to our example *Velcro*, one reason genericization can occur is that there is only one item velcro can refer to. In other words, there is a single association. The brand name *Kenzo*, on the other hand, refers to a whole line of products from clothing to towels to chop sticks and no single association can be made. Under Hypothesis 4 it would be highly improbable that *Kenzo* could become generic.

Results of the Application of Genericization Theory

Clankie (1999b) applied the four hypotheses of genericization theory to a corpus of 100 brand names that had been deemed generic as a result of varied source two-token testing. In other words, the criteria for identifying a brand name as generic included the use in a generic context, either through de-majusculization or through context alone, in two separate sources, as evident in the Oxford English Dictionary or through unedited Internet web pages. The results below demonstrate the results of each

hypothesis.

In Hypothesis 1 (Novelty), 50 of the 100 brand names were found to be novel in their original semantic class. Specifically, when those products entered the market their respective semantic classes did not exist, or rather, were created at the same time as the brand name and therefore may be seen in terms of what may be called a functional zero.

In Hypothesis 2 (Length and Predominance), each of the 100 brand names was measured in comparison to its generic class noun phrases in terms of the number of words, syllables, and morphemes. The following table illustrates the results.

	brand	class noun
Word	1.4	2.0
Syllable	2.6	4.4
Morpheme	2.1	3.2

Table 1. Brand vs. Class Noun Length

As can be seen from the table above, generic brand names were shorter than their corresponding class noun phrases in each of the three levels.

Hypothesis 3 (Genericization as a Regular Process) argued that generic brand name change is regular in the sense that it recurringly occurs in the same pattern. In the corpus, 99 of the 100 generic brand names matched the proposed pattern. The one exception, the brand name *Day-Glo* however, was missing the corresponding noun form. This, however, did not provide sufficient counterevidence against this hypothesis since the lack of a noun form was not as a result of a problem with the hypothesis itself. Rather the fact that the brand name followed the precise patterning expected, exclusive of the noun, simply reflects the language as not taking advantage of the potential available. In other words, it is not that the language can not produce a noun for Day-Glo, but rather at this point in the development of the word it simply hasn't.

Finally, in Hypothesis 4 (The Single Association Hypothesis) 89 of the 100 brand names were in association to a single product alone. The remaining 11, which included brands such as Levi's that currently produce a variety of other types of apparel, originally produced only a single product and genericized prior to the introduction of the other types of apparel. The generic *levi's* in the mind of many native speakers simply means 'a pair of

jeans'.

Genericization Outside of English

In addition to English, Clankie (1999b) also examined Japanese. While the results of that study are tentative and the corpus currently small, by all accounts genericization in Japanese functions according to the precise patterning and triggers as in English. This is inevitably due to the legal constraints placed upon Japanese (through International Trademark Conventions such as the Madrid Protocol and others), and the structurally similarity required by such laws. Some examples of generic brand names in Japanese include *Muhi*, *Makiron*, *Kinchooru*, *Pokeberu*, *Walkman*, and so forth. Further examples of generic brand name change have been identified for French (Bic 'pen', Biro 'pen') and Korean (Sharp pen 'a mechanical pen or pencil').

Type 1 vs. Type 2 Changes

Thusfar, the study of genericization has revealed two types of generic change. The first, the type mentioned throughout this study are intra-class changes. Yet, a second type exists. These are changes that occur across semantic classes. Two examples of this latter type found in English are the brand names *Spam* and *Oreo*. *Spam*, a type of canned luncheon meat, has come to genericize both in the Type 1 form (i.e. to refer to any type of canned luncheon meat), but also it has recently come to refer to junk e-mail (e.g. *I've been spammed*, or *Stop sending me e-mail spam!*). In these latter examples, the relationship of the original brand is exemplified not through the similarity of the product itself, but rather through it's perceived qualities, either positively or negatively so. In the case of *spam*, it is likely that the characteristics of low-quality, cheap, fat, excess, etc. have been borrowed to typify this unwanted type of junk mail. The second example, Oreo, in the same way as with *spam* has come to be a derogatory term in American English for an African-American who acts too much like a Caucasian. Again, in the case of *oreo*, we can see that the characteristic colors of the Oreo cookie have been extended rather than the product itself. Corpus construction of brand names exhibiting Type 2 changes is currently underway.

Thoughts on the Actuation Problem

Actuation, or how changes are started, has been a traditional theoretical problem in language change. Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog 1968 noted the quandary actuation presents.

> The over-all process of linguistic change may involve stimuli and constraints both from society and from the structure of language. The difficulty of the actuation riddle is evident from the number of factors which influence change: it is likely that all explanations to be advanced in the near future will be after the fact (186).

Weinreich et al. believed that the complexity of language change was a hinderance to its predictability. Yet, the highly constrained nature of brand names, and in particular the visible date of origination into the language and the strict registration process, offer a glimpse not found in other areas of language. One goal of genericization was to attempt, at least in part through the identification of the triggers of generic change, to suggest the types of brand names likely to undergo genericization. This would then turn the after-the-fact examination of brand names into a glimpse at what is likely to happen, thus addressing in part the actuation problem.

The question now then, is how do brand names begin to change. A number of factors are indeed involved. In addition to the contributions the construction of brand names make (as evidenced in Hypotheses 1, 2, and 4), in addition we may note that many speakers do not recognize the brand names as such (either through believing they are proper nouns, or through discontinuous transmission from speaker to speaker. In such cases, the changes exemplified in Hypothesis 3 will be almost immediate. Grace 1997 (685-686) has argued that linguistic change is instigated by a change in one's knowledge of language (KOL). He writes,

> Individuals' knowledge of language is nothing more than a large memory store of experiences-with the emphasis on experiences in which language was used. For linguistic purposes, we may think of this as essentially a store of utterances. We interpret what's said by recalling other cases where the same thing or something similar was said. We decide what to say by recalling similar situations and what was said in them (and what the consequences were).

Grace (1997b: 1) summarizes these changes, '...the reality behind language states, and therefore linguistic change, turns out ultimately to be individuals' knowledge of language (KOL).' As Clankie (1999b: 181) relating Grace's findings to brand name change points out,

> **This is precisely what happens in brand names. Essentially, there is a change in the KOL resulting in a new entry into one's mental lexicon. If this lexical item is a brand name, yet is unrecognized as such, the result is the implementation, albeit unintentionally, of the brand as a common noun. If one speaker of the language can make this change then 10,000 can...If the brand name is learned as the name of the product, then the transmission of that name to others will also be done generically and the change begins to spread. This is then the actuation of brand name change.**

That all studies may be 'after the fact' may be partially true. Yet, in the case of brand names, plausible triggers for actuation can indeed be identified and these in turn may be helpful and could suggest how actuation might take place in other types of change.

Semantic Regularity

The second problem in studies of semantic change, and that discussed in relation to the formulation of Hypothesis 3, has been whether semantic change might in some way be regular or whether as McMahon (1994: 175) notes, '...each word has its own history'. In Hypothesis 3 I sought to demonstrate that in the case of brand names and the type of semantic broadening exhibited in genericization there is nothing irregular or haphazard about the changes. In the corpus of 100 brand names examined in Clankie 1999, all 100 fit the precise patterning of Hypothesis 3. Therefore, it must be assumed that semantic broadening in brand names, or genericization, is a regular and systematic change. I would not wish at this point, however, to suggest that all semantic change is regular. In the same vain, to take the other extreme, that each word has its own history and therefore semantic change is haphazard, would be problematic as well.

Conclusions and Further Research

Having completed a comprehensive examination of Type 1 generic

changes in American English, it will be important to broaden the scope of the study to other languages. Similarly and as noted above, corpus collection is underway for Type 2 cross-class changes in order to reach some understanding of the motivations for this type of change. The ultimate goal of this theory is to take advantage of the constraints provided by brand names to attain some level of generalization regarding the nature of this type of change, in an attempt to extend the findings of this type of change to other types of semantic change.

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